

Endless Grace
John 3: 14-17
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The third chapter in the Gospel of John is an account of a meeting that takes place in the darkness of night between Jesus and a Pharisee named Nicodemus. In today's reading from John 3:14-17 we enter into the middle of this mysterious conversation and we hear Jesus speaking. Listen and hear God's word.

John 3:14-21

¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

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Today's text is one of the most beloved and quoted passages: ¹⁶*For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.* It's one of the first Scriptures many of us memorize as a child. It encapsulates the good news of the Gospel- that God's love and grace comes to us through Jesus Christ.

Today's reading begins with Jesus referencing the Exodus story where Moses lifts up the serpent to save the people from death. Jesus mentions this story as a foreshadowing of his own death on the cross, the surrendering of his life for our salvation.

In the days of Moses, people looked upon a bronze serpent, to be saved from the deadly bite of poisonous snakes that came upon them in the wilderness. God sent these snakes as punishment for their complaints against God and Moses. But because God loved them, God also provided an escape from the consequences of their sin through the bronze serpent that Moses lifts up.

Jesus is letting Nicodemus know that he, Jesus, is now how God's love and grace are moving in the world. Through Jesus, God comes among us to bring us back from whatever distant shores we've washed up on; from whatever messes we've made of our lives; from whatever failures and shortcomings we've encountered, to restore us to a life giving relationship with *God*, with *others* and with *ourselves*.

When I served as a hospice chaplain, a patient I visited told me that he wasn't sure that he was worthy of salvation. He went on to explain that while he was in the hospital God got his attention through a nurse, who'd been especially kind and compassionate towards him. This nurse's father had abandoned her family when she was a child and she never had contact with him after that. When the man heard her story, he thought: *"what a loss and shame that her father doesn't know what a wonderful person his daughter is!"*

Then he was reminded of his story of loss and shame, for he too was estranged from his own daughter. As a young man he had a daughter with a woman who was addicted to drugs and alcohol. Eventually he tired of the drama of living with an addict and he took off, leaving his 10-year-old daughter with her mother.

He started a new life and a new business. As his business took off he had less time for his daughter. He spent fewer weekends with her. The time between their visits became months and then years. And eventually they stopped communicating all together.

Through the nurse's story he recognized an uncomfortable truth about himself, which he had avoided until then. He owned up to the truth that he'd been a poor father to his daughter. He didn't even really know her. She was a mother now and he hadn't even met his grandchildren. The weight of his guilt and regret weighed heavy on him as his health was declining. And though he considered himself to be a Christian, this heavy burden was causing him to *"doubt whether he was worthy of salvation."* God used the kindness of a nurse to open the eyes of this man to the truth about himself. God can use anything or anyone to awaken us to our deep need for a savior. When we think we have our lives and Jesus all figured out, is precisely when he often unsettles us. He meets us in the dark corners of our lives when we least expect him extending a hand that reaches for us in love.

One of the places where we often hide from our need for Jesus is in the pews. Maybe it's because we are blind to our need for him because we don't want to look in the dark corners of our lives for fear of what will be uncovered. Or maybe it's precisely because we are deeply aware of our brokenness that we may harbor our own doubts as to our own worthiness of God's love.

In his book *"The Good News from North Haven"*, Michael Lindvall tells a story about a young pastor who comes to an aging and dying church that was unfortunately located between a new freeway and an old set of railroad tracks. The neighborhood that built the church went from being "residential" to "commercial and mixed" 30 years ago and much of the congregation had moved away by the time he arrives.

The pastor has a vision for reviving this dying church. He gets the church to purchase a wireless mic as part of that vision to introduce them to cutting edge technology. The first Sunday after the wireless mic arrives, he wires himself up, puts on his robe, and reaches into his pocket to push the switch to "off". Unknowingly he pushes in the wrong direction.

As the congregation sits in the sanctuary waiting for the service to begin, the first odd sound they hear is the rustling of papers as the pastor shuffles through notes on his desk.

The pastor glances out the window of his office and sees a middle-aged couple from the Congregational church on the other side of the highway heading towards the door. The Congregational church is in the middle of some major disagreement and people were reportedly leaving in droves. The pastor opens his office door, which causes the congregation to look up at the ceiling speakers.

He then calls to an elder in the hallway: "*Sam, the Smiths from the Congregational church are coming in the front door. I want you to go and make nice to 'em.*" As Sam marches off, the pastor mutters these fatal words to himself and to an attentively listening congregation;

"Maybe a few mad Congregationalists can breathe some life into this corpse!"

Now the pastor has drunk four cups of coffee that morning and the next thing he does is walk into the bathroom, open the door, do what he needs to do, flushes, and sighs deeply. All of this is clearly audible to the stunned congregation. The full range of his humanity, physical and spiritual, is broadcast to his entire congregation.

The pastor resigns not long after.

The psalmist writes: "*O Lord you have searched me and known me. You discern my thoughts from afar. You are acquainted with all my ways. Even before a word is on my tongue O Lord, you know it.*"(Psalm 139) In essence we are all fitted with wireless mics that are patched into the mind of God. And the switch is always turned "**on**".¹

The One who hurled the planets into place, is also the One *who loves the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.* That is the good news of the Gospel.

No one is beyond the love and grace of God. No one's sin is greater than our Savior Jesus Christ, who knows everything about us: every *thought*, every *motivation*, every *scheme*, every *action*, every *inaction*, every *falsehood*, and every *failure*. No exceptions!

All is known and all is forgiven! Thanks be to God!

1. Michael Lindvall, "The Good News from North Haven", The Crossroad Publishing Company (September 1, 2002)